

## Unstoppable Resistance to Charter Schools

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**Abstract:** Exploring the large chasm between charter school hype and charter school reality reveals changes in criticism of charter schools. A wave of critique from within charter school education has produced a rising tide of widespread concern about, opposition towards, and activism against charter schools. The emerging movement against charter schools seeks to replace an education system guided by ideologies of individualism, consumerism, behaviorism, Social Darwinism, and the “free market” with a pro-social human-centered education system and society. Join the fight to free public education!

In 2015 the *Washington Post* shared this observation by a veteran public school official about privately-operated charter schools: “David Hornbeck was the Maryland State Superintendent of Schools from 1976 to 1988 and the superintendent of the Philadelphia school district from 1994 to 2000. For years he was a supporter of charter schools, seeing them as an important tool in the school reform arsenal, and as Philadelphia’s superintendent, he recommended that more than 30 charter schools be allowed to open. Now, in a reversal that is rare in education, he said this: “The last 20 years make it clear I was wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Hornbeck is one of many who have traveled this increasingly non-rare road of awakening. Many others have also experienced rude awakenings due to the large chasm between charter school hype and charter school realities.

In 2019, commenting on chronic problems with charter schools and the growing backlash against them, Eliza Shapiro, a New York City education reporter, had this to say in a *New York Times* article titled “How Did Charter Schools Lose Their Luster?”: “I have been writing about charter schools in New York for the last six years. I had been hearing from some of my sources who run charter schools, work in charter schools, think about charter schools, that there had been sort of this sea change in how willing leaders of charters were to acknowledge shortcomings in their schools.”<sup>2</sup> Although this is superficially true, it is still an important conclusion. Charter school promoters have always been averse, even hostile, to admitting to problems with charter schools, even when numerous popular and scholarly reports, books, and articles have documented many persistent problems in the sector. A deep anti-intellectual disposition has long characterized the orientation of charter school supporters and promoters, which makes them continually dismissive of anything critical of charter schools.

But perhaps more damning and indicting than Hornbeck’s and Shapiro’s statements is this stunning 2014 comment from Margaret Raymond, Director of the neoliberal Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, which enthusiastically promotes charter schools:

This is one of the big insights for me because I actually am a kind of pro-market kind of girl, but the marketplace doesn’t seem to work in a choice environment for education... I’ve studied competitive markets for much of my

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss, V. (2015, March 4). A stunning reversal on charter schools. *Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/03/04/a-stunning-reversal-on-charter-schools/>

<sup>2</sup> How did charter schools lose their luster? Our reporter explains. (2019, July 26). *New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/26/insider/charter-school-backlash-new-york.html>

career... Education is the only industry/sector where the market mechanism just doesn't work... I think it's not helpful to expect parents to be the agents of quality assurance throughout the state. There are other supports that are needed... I think we need to have a greater degree of oversight of charter schools, but I also think we need to have more oversight of the overseers... the authorizers.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, even though she does not call for a stop to charter school expansion or an end to organizing society on the basis of the outmoded and discredited "free market," Raymond, a major and long-time promoter of "free market" ideology, is openly and publicly stating that the "free market" doesn't work in education. The fact is that social programs and public enterprises like education, which are germane to the extended reproduction of society, simply do not lend themselves to consumerism and commodity logic.<sup>4</sup> Passing on the accumulated knowledge of humanity to the next generation is a social responsibility, not a business. Schools should not operate on the basis of the chaos, anarchy, and violence of the "free market." As for the issue of charter school oversight and accountability, both remain largely absent in the crisis-prone charter school sector. Charter schools are notorious for lack of transparency. It should be noted that CREDO is heavily funded by major billionaires and venture philanthropists such as Bill Gates, Sam Walton, Eli Broad, and others; all have been actively promoting charter schools for decades.

To be sure, there is nothing grassroots about privately-operated charter schools which have been around for nearly three decades and enroll about three million youth. This is one reason why more than 95% of the 7,000 privately-operated charter schools in the U.S. are not started, owned, or operated by teachers, even though the public has long been led to believe that a main reason for launching "innovative" privately-operated charter schools was to empower teachers and unleash pedagogical creativity to reach those students the public education "monopoly" was "not reaching."

It has taken a while, but today more individuals, groups, and organizations in many different spheres are actively taking up efforts to oppose charter schools in one way or another. They are not just passively opposing charter schools. Social consciousness of charter school problems is not what it used to be; it has developed and matured in many ways and will grow more profound and sophisticated in the coming months and years. This priceless social consciousness has reached a level of consolidation which cannot be breached.

Gone are the days of automatic, uncritical, and drive-by assertions of support for charter schools. Currently, few people blindly and spontaneously praise charter schools. There are now enough high-quality articles, books, and reports (thousands) on charter school problems that everyone, at a minimum, thinks and speaks about charter schools with numerous caveats. Many have even taken the initiative to actually investigate charter schools on a systematic basis and completely reject and condemn charter schools. Even many individuals who work in charter schools are aware of and do not dispute many of the growing criticisms of charter schools. In fact, some of the most trenchant critiques, exposures, and condemnations of charter schools

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond, M. Speech to City Club of Cleveland. (2014, December 10).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1-mPiSQLfc>

<sup>4</sup> Kuttner, R. (1997). *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (New York: Knopf).

have come from those who have worked in or attended a charter school. They have witnessed firsthand the many problems plaguing charter schools and have even become whistleblowers.

In a sign of the times, sanitized declarations of the virtues and promises of charter schools no longer seem to have a strong hold on many. Decades of ceaseless government and media disinformation about charter schools has not stopped the steady growth of critical consciousness of charter schools. Anti-consciousness about charter schools has slowly eroded and will keep eroding. The force of history is not with privatizers and neoliberals, which is why the charter school sector has experienced notable setbacks in recent years. This quality of social consciousness is what is most precious and valuable in the current situation. It is a force gathering steam because of the conditions we find ourselves in. It is a trend that is new, rising, and growing because it is part of the new outlook and new arrangements needed for society to move forward. Charter school ideology, on the other hand, is part of the old and decaying outlook and way of organizing education and society. Charter schools do not represent a modern human-centered way of educating large societies based on mass industrial production. One might say a sort of turning point has been reached in the fight to defend public education and oppose education arrangements based on the ideologies of individualism, consumerism, behaviorism, Social Darwinism, and the “free market.”

This is why, even though charter schools keep multiplying in various communities, charter school advocates are more defensive and worried about the future of charter schools. They do not cherish the reality of growing opposition to privatized education arrangements and have become increasingly oversensitive and desperate in their defense of school privatization. From the perspective of charter school owners and operators, pay-the-rich schemes like charter schools, both nonprofit and for-profit, are far too lucrative to forfeit without an intense fight.

The endless serious problems plaguing charter schools are too numerous to highlight and describe here. However, they have been well-documented by me<sup>5</sup> and hundreds of others in many places and are available to anyone who engages in a conscious act of finding out. The main issue in the current context is to join forces with all those analyzing and opposing school privatization. Today these include a large swath of individuals and organizations:

1. School boards
2. Teacher unions
3. A large and growing number of teacher educators, parents, and students
4. Most teacher education students (pre-service teachers)
5. Dozens of education advocacy organizations
6. Numerous rights and justice groups
7. More city, state, and federal legislators
8. A growing section of the general population

Together, these individuals and organizations consist of, shape, and influence millions around the country. This was not the case 5-10 years ago. In its early stages, the top-down charter school movement faced little resistance. The movement against privatized education has come a long way in a relatively short period of time. And there is no reason to believe that this

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<sup>5</sup> Tell, S. (2015). *Charter School Report Card* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., Critical Consciousness Series).

trend can be stopped or reversed. The train has left the station, as the saying goes. If anything, in this fluid period, resistance to charter schools, vouchers, and all privatized education arrangements will likely grow.

In the final analysis, defending public education and the public interest means depriving powerful private interests of the ability to decide the use and destiny of public funds, assets, and enterprises. Funding for public education and other public enterprises must be increased and kept out of the hands of the rich. Major decisions about the wealth produced by society, and the public institutions and social programs that rely on these funds, must be made by the people themselves. Major owners of capital are only interested in maximizing profit as fast as possible no matter the damage to the social and natural environment. They are not interested in advancing the general interests of society or establishing a pro-social direction for society and its institutions. They are not concerned with the common good or building a modern nation. They have been using pay-the-rich schemes such as charter schools to annually funnel billions of public dollars into private hands. This, in turn, has damaged public schools, the economy, society, and the national interest.

Control of public authority by powerful private interests is retrogressive. Private entities like cyber charter schools and brick-and-mortar charter schools should secure funds through non-public sources because they have no valid or legitimate claim to public funds or assets. They must not be allowed to wield public authority to enrich themselves. Public institutions and funds must remain under public control, free of the alien claims of owners of capital. Forty years of the neoliberal antisocial offensive has starved public schools and social programs of much-needed funds produced by working people. In addition to being setup to fail, public schools have been scapegoated by the ruling elite for every problem in society.

It does not have to be this way. There is an alternative. A brighter future is possible. A pro-social human-centered education system and society can and must be brought into being by organizing and mobilizing ourselves. This is the only way to advance the public interest and defeat the neoliberal anti-social offensive. In the complicated here and now, new forms of self-organizing and new energies have already arisen. More people from all walks of life are connecting more dots and merging different struggles to advance the public interest. A shift in consciousness is palpable. The current crisis, which will continue to deepen, offers some openings that hold the promise of combating charter schools even more effectively.

Join the growing and vibrant movement against privatization and neoliberalism! Fight for a new society where the people themselves decide the main affairs of society and where the rich are no longer allowed to distort and hijack consciousness, public enterprises, the economy, and society for their self-serving interests. The rich and their conscious and anti-conscious representatives and allies can and must be blocked. Our best strategy is to avoid diversionary debates and false dichotomies surrounding charter schools. There is no shortage of such distractions and rabbit holes, whether it is the severe obsession with test scores, self-serving notions of “choice,” or the for-profit versus nonprofit status of a charter school. The main issue must remain our focus: Public funds, assets, and authority must remain firmly in public hands and under full public control.